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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000079

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INITIAL MEETING WITH CAMBODIAN PRIME  
MINISTER HUN SEN

Classified by: Ambassador Carol A. Rodley for reasons 1.4  
(b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In the Ambassador's first call on Prime Minister Hun Sen since presenting credentials, the PM took the opportunity to renew his personal relationship with the Ambassador and review the evolution of U.S.-Cambodian relations over the past several years, highlighting several areas of successful cooperation. Hun Sen congratulated President Obama on his inauguration, expressed hope that the new administration will be successful in its bid to stimulate the sluggish domestic economy, and noted the bilateral relationship had already taken on a "new face." He called the U.S. the locomotive for the world's economic train and noted how important a U.S. recovery would be for Cambodia's economic growth, which he pegged at 7 percent in ¶2009. The Prime Minister was particularly effusive about the role of Peace Corps volunteers in Cambodia in helping to communicate the image of Cambodia to the American people. The Ambassador pledged her determination to work on shifting the perception of Cambodia in the U.S. from one stuck in the past to a more accurate view of Cambodia in its present state. Although he raised ASEAN, praising the U.S. appointment of an Ambassador to ASEAN, the PM did not bring up bilateral relations with Thailand or the Preah Vihear border dispute. END SUMMARY.

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Renewing Acquaintances  
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¶2. (C) The Ambassador's first formal call on Prime Minister Hun Sen in an hour-long meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs January 29 was characterized by warm personal greetings and the renewal of their earlier acquaintance. The PM was pleased to note that the Ambassador's previous assignment here means she is already well-versed in the many facets of Cambodia, including its language and culture, and said he hoped this background would help to improve relations between the two countries. He also noted the fortuitous timing of the Ambassador's presentation of credentials, which took place on the same day as the presidential inauguration. The PM highlighted the evolution of U.S.-Cambodia relations, citing different spheres of cooperation in mil-mil, health sector, and trade/investment to exemplify the increased breadth and depth of the relationship. He credited the U.S. for being a key player in facilitating Cambodian development over the past decade, and expressed obvious pride in Cambodia's progress since the Ambassador's previous assignment here from 1997 - 2000.

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13. (C) When the Ambassador recounted visiting Hun Sen in his Takhmau headquarters a decade earlier when he showed detailed maps of his campaign against the Khmer Rouge, the PM immediately lit up and recounted prior discussions about capturing Khmer Rouge leaders. Recalling that some of those leaders had since died, he noted that Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan were now in custody and awaiting trial at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT). He also gratefully recalled Senator John Kerry's vital role in negotiating the adoption of the super-majority mechanism by which judgments will be rendered at the KRT.

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US-Cambodia

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14. (C) The PM expressed confidence that growth and cooperation between the two countries would continue to increase. He conveyed his gratitude for U.S. assistance to Cambodia while noting in particular the U.S. role in Cambodia's economic growth. He referred to the dramatic evolution in perceptions of the United States, from the dark days of the Pol Pot era when even the suspicion of association with the United States might be enough to earn a death sentence, to the current state of affairs in which Peace Corps volunteers live with Cambodian host families in villages across the country, enjoying a free exchange of impressions and lessons between the two cultures.

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A Different Cambodia

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15. (C) Following the Ambassador's observation that Cambodians appear more confident, engaged in the world, and optimistic about both their shared and individual futures than when she departed in the summer of 2000, the PM recalled the immense challenges then facing the country. At that time Cambodia was in the throes of the worst flooding in 100 years, with over half the population dramatically affected. The PM spoke proudly of the strides the country has made since then, noting that "serious management" by the government has contributed to economic growth and improved infrastructure such as roads and construction projects, with steady progress toward democratization. In a thinly veiled criticism of Thailand, he referred to difficulties faced by other countries in the region with peaceful transitions of power, and while he conceded that Cambodia is still an emerging democracy, he expressed pride at the conduct of the 2008 national election. The challenges faced by Cambodia in 2009 are of such a different nature from those ten years ago that, as he joked, one of his biggest problems is how much longer it will take before the refurbishment of his house in Phnom Penh is completed.

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Economic situation

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16. (C) The Prime Minister noted more than once that the United States is the "locomotive" of global economic growth, and American growth has a ripple effect on other national economies. He pointed to the U.S. role in helping to stimulate the Cambodian economy in recent years, by making U.S. markets available to Cambodian products, especially those in the garment industry. Despite Cambodia's economic slowdown, the PM predicted 7 percent growth in 2009 and said USD 2 billion in Cambodian products will still end up on the U.S. market. The PM expressed hope that investment by U.S. companies such as Chevron would not be affected by the global economic slowdown.

Acknowledging the international implications of U.S. economic slowdown/growth, the Ambassador reiterated that the President's foremost priority is to revitalize the flagging economy.

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Mil-Mil relations  
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¶7. (C) Both the PM and the Ambassador agreed that mil-mil cooperation, particularly in the areas of demining and peacekeeping operations, is a source of strong bilateral cooperation which will undoubtedly continue. He pointed to U.S.-supported Cambodian participation in Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) exercises in Mongolia and Bangladesh as two examples of welcome U.S. military assistance. (NOTE: Cambodia will host the GPOI peacekeepers' Capstone Exercise in 2010. END NOTE.) In keeping with the theme of changed perceptions, the PM noted that in the past, the presence of a U.S. Navy ship in international waters near Cambodia was greeted with nervousness and uncertainty. Now, Navy ships are welcomed with open arms when they berth at the port in Sihanoukville, both for the generosity of the medical and other humanitarian projects they engage in during their visit as well as the opportunity for cultural and economic interchange between military personnel and the Cambodians living in the area. Aircraft based on the ships are permitted flight clearance throughout the country to engage in humanitarian missions in remote areas, even making one stop in 2007 to the Prime Minister's hometown.

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Foreign Policy Under the Obama Administration  
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¶8. (C) The Ambassador drew attention to the President's goal of enhancing our partnerships in Asia, in the context of reviving the primacy of American diplomacy. The PM remarked that "when the U.S. lifts one leg, all its weight shifts to the other" as a way of saying that U.S. behavior has an impact on the rest of the world, and even small countries such as Cambodia monitor and are affected by U.S. policies. He noted regional concerns such as nuclear

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proliferation in North Korea, and said that Cambodia will be paying close attention to U.S. policy there and in other areas further afield including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and recent developments in Gaza.

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Cambodia's Role in International Community  
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¶9. (C) The PM was at pains to point out that while Cambodia is a small country, it has a role to play in the international arena. He noted its membership in the non-aligned movement and its active role in ASEAN. Even though Cambodia itself has not been a victim of terrorism, the PM acknowledged the importance of counterterrorism cooperation as a responsibility shared by all members of the global community. He underscored the appointment of U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN Scot Marciel as a positive sign of America's increased engagement with both ASEAN and the region in general. He also noted with satisfaction that Cambodia, once considered a "victim" of landmines requiring assistance from others, is now contributing its expertise by sending teams of deminers to Sudan as part of international peacekeeping efforts.

¶10. (C) Comment: Hun Sen appeared well-briefed and was relaxed and loquacious. While the meeting did not focus in detail on any particular subject, the warmth of the Prime Minister's greeting and tenor of his comments clearly indicated his pleasure at the Ambassador's appointment and

the high premium he places on the bilateral relationship. He spoke at great length about the value of the Peace Corps and the value of more people-to-people contacts. The PM expressed his enthusiasm for discussing an array of issues with the Ambassador in more substance and detail in future (gushingly stating that he spends more of his time with the American Ambassador than with any other members of the diplomatic community). While there will certainly be subjects on which the U.S. and Cambodia do not see eye-to-eye, the nature of the relationship has evolved into a more multi-faceted, mature one in which frank discussion is valued. The PM was pleased to hear the Ambassador declare her commitment to shift the perception of Cambodia's condition from one rooted in its difficult past to one which focuses on its future, and pledged that it will be "our task" to work on that transformation in attitudes together.

Rodley